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An Invasion of Privacy

By

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Whenever one needs to be buried, he should call in a professional. There is no substitute for experience. One of the most professional undertaking services in this country is advertised throughout Southern California as "The Better Way." Without question, it is a high class and imaginative organization which can be trusted. As a part of its promotional literature, The Better Way publishes a handsome illustrated brochure which it sells in its flower shop for one dollar and fifty cents, plus tax. With dignity and assurance, this booklet urges the advantage of entrusting oneself to The Better Way in time of need, or even before.

Besides a guarantee of professional integrity, the booklet offers both spiritual and material assurance. For those in doubt and perplexity, it states unequivocally, "(The Better Way) has found the answer to the Mystery of Life." Those who may fear the grave are comforted by details of a luxurious mortuary. 'Of class A steel, and reinforced concrete construction, this Mortuary is built to resist fire, earthquake, and time.

This address was originally delivered at the Annual CEA Meeting, Holland House Tavern, New York City, December 27, 1950. The author is president of the College English Association, and its past executive secretary.

This positive protection to the precious departed, in surroundings of consoling beauty, brings the bereaved a sense of security and peace at a time when the heart is heavy." As a final and clinching argument for the advantages of a Complete Undertaking Service, the brochure adds, "At (The Better Way), undertaking is combined with all forms of interment, in one sacred place, under one friendly management, with one convenient credit arrangement for everything."

Many have found deep satisfaction in what is offered by The Better Way, and their patronage has made it one of the most profitable real estate developments in this country. But others find the whole enterprise ridiculous. Whether it seems comic or not depends on one's sense of values, for as Lucian says, "There is no common judgment in men, but what you admire others will laugh at." To be man alive is to have a sense of values, a sense of propriety. And while "none go just alike, yet each believes his own." There is no comedy possible unless the comic writer and his audience share the same values.

Stephen Leacock could find nothing comic in stories of suffering, like the one of a man who is sitting by his wife's deathbed. She turns her pale, haggard face to him and says, "John, I know you hate my sister Peggy, but I want you to promise me you'll take her to my funeral."

John nods and replies, "If you want me to, dear, I promise, but it'll spoil my day."

Leacock comments, "Whatever humor there may be in this is lost for me by the actual and vivid picture that it conjures up—the dying wife, the darkened room, and the last whispered request."

In the presence of a Roman Catholic priest, a friend of mine with a famous repertoire was asked to tell his favorite story of a raffle at a Catholic bazaar. Pat the Irishman and his parish priest are discussing the chief prizes in the raffle, a Lincoln, a Mercury, and a Ford. Pat asks, "An' would it be too much to ask, Father, who won the Lincoln?"

"Not at all, Pat. I know you'll be very happy to hear that the Monsignor won the Lincoln."

"Sure, and glad I am to hear it, Father. But who won the Mercury?"

"Well, Pat, God in his wisdom saw fit that the Bishop should win the Mercury."

" 'Tis a fine thing, Father, a fine thing. An' who won the Ford?"

A little self-consciously the priest replied, "This was a lucky day for the church, Pat. I won the Ford myself."

"Sure, an' I congratulate you, Father. It warms me heart to think that you and the bishop and the monsignor will all be riding around in those grand cars. It does indeed. But Father, I must tell you that I was pretty lucky meself."

"Were you, Pat? What prize did you win?"

"The devil a prize, man, I didn't buy any of your blasted tickets."

The story drew a laugh, but the priest was not amused. One of the group said to him, "I hope you aren't offended, Father."

"Oh, no," replied the priest. "But you see, I won a Ford myself two weeks ago."

Besides common values and a common sense of humor, the comic writer and his audience must also share a common fund of experience. For Comedy, whatever it is, must be spontaneous, without effort. It must light up with the quick, full radiance of an incandescent bulb. Explanation dims it, and thought puts it out altogether. As Freud points out, we never know at the time why we laugh, although we can usually determine the reason later.

The reason is clear only if one understands the nature of the Comic, and particularly if one understands what the Comic is not. It is of first importance to remember that the Comic is not something by itself. It is always revealed in terms of a relationship, and almost always of a relationship that is suggested but not stated. A good example is the relation between the original and the parody, or the relation between what we feel is proper and sensible and what we see is neither. Moreover, it is not possible to distinguish comic subjects from subjects which are not comic, for there is no area of experience which may not seem comic at some time to some person.

A group of Scots once told me with relish a grim tale of the first World War, during all of which they had served in the British Army. Once when they had been in the front line for a long time, an officer, captain as I recall of a nearby company, had taken to shouting insults across at the Germans in the opposite trench. A windy and arrogant fellow, this officer had never been popular with his men, and they now wondered what the bloody fool thought he was about with all his yelling. But as he got worse, and even began to show himself above the trench when he harangued the enemy, the men's attitude changed. If he kept up that sort of thing, they knew they wouldn't have to put up with him much longer, and a damned good riddance, too. Finally, one morning when the officer in a desperate rage climbed out of the trench entirely and began to curse the Germans, the men muttered that now he was going

to get it sure. And when a German machine gunner mowed him down, they laughed quietly to themselves. He'd certainly got what was coming to him. And twenty-five years later, three thousand miles away, in a professor's quiet living room, these friendly men still thought it was a good joke. Even though we may 'understand' why they felt that way, few of us will find much comedy in this story. Nor will we come to understand the Comic if we attempt to draw lines separating what is comic material from what is not.

Another seductive error about the Comic is an attempt to identify it with laughter. It seems reasonable enough to maintain that since we laugh at the Comic, the Comic must be that which makes us laugh. But frequently we laugh without any comic stimulus at all, in sheer exuberance of play, at good news for ourselves or at bad news for a competitor or rival, or merely because we are tickled. Moreover, a comic experience often fails to excite laughter, particularly when we are alone. Solitary laughter, like solitary drinking, is suspicious. Laughter seems to be mainly a group phenomenon. If a comic situation is presented with the right timing, perhaps with an element of surprise, and so that we absorb it quickly and easily, so that we 'see the point' without effort, we are likely to laugh, particularly if we are in company. But we also laugh when we don't see the point, to keep from revealing our stupidity. And we laugh when we're embarrassed or nervous, or when we're hurt by a shaft that strikes a little too deep. In Emily Dickinson's phrase, 'Mirth is the mail of anguish.'

The Comic and Laughter may frequently appear together, but like ham and eggs, they are separate phenomena, and should be considered separately. Why, in our delight at the Comic, or at good news, or at pleasant physical sensations, should we cackle and grimace and wheeze and whoop and writhe and even beat each other on the back? Like the name Achilles assumed when he hid among women, these are puzzling questions, if not beyond conjecture. But they lie outside the chaste limits of literary criticism. The whole significance of laughter is something for psychiatrists and physiologists to investigate. It is interesting, however, to note Julian Huxley's comment, "Biologically, the important feature of human laughter seems to lie in its providing a release for conflict, a resolution of troublesome situations." In a word, laughter restores one's Ego.

* * *

However this may be, Comedy and the nature of the Comic are the present concern. If one cannot come to understand Comedy by separating what is Comic from what is not, or by identifying the Comic with Laugh-

ter, how can the Comic be got at? The best way, I suggest, is to consider our direct relation with the Comic itself. When we do, we notice at once the enormous variety of comic expression, and we wonder if there can be any element common to Aristophanes and George Meredith, to Jimmy Durante and the Dorian Mime, to the satires of Horace and the antics of *Harvey*, to Gogol and Shaw, to Medieval Mummers and Swift, to Chekhov and Voltaire, to the whole underworld of bawdy jest and Molière, to circus clowns and Caliban, or to Rabelais and Jane Austen. The common element assuredly cannot be one of subject matter, or of form, or of technical devices.

But we also notice a significant persistence of certain comic themes. Aristophanes and Chaucer and Thurber all ridicule feminism. Petronius and Horace and Pope and Scott Fitzgerald all have sport with the friendly, egregious parvenu. Pedantry and the shams of priest and politician amused Lucian and Rabelais and Voltaire and Swift. Man's vanity in his relations with woman, woman's duplicity in her relations with man—to say nothing of her relations with woman, and the whole panorama of family stresses including the mother-in-law—all these and many more we can trace in a continuous comic recessional back to the Old Comedy of Athens and apparently beyond that into the jests of unrecorded time.

This persistence of theme suggests strongly that man's nature has changed little in this period, and that each age has had to learn for itself and from its own comedy. The comic writer, if he produces no lasting effect, is a perpetual healthy influence for good humor, good sense, and good will. Like Bishop Ransom, he can only say, "I may have perhaps made some hearts richer, some minds clearer, and inspired some to more noble prompting, and if so, I am indeed happy." Certain it is that the harrassed actors on life's stage would be at a loss much more frequently were it not for the promptings of the comic spirit.

But as we continue to think of our direct relation with the Comic itself, after we have noted the great variety of expression and the significant persistence of themes, we begin to sense that the Comic may be understood only by examining what it *does*, and why, not what it *is*. For the Comic is something inside us and not something outside.

Whenever we experience it, and in whatever form, the Comic *does* the same thing—it gives a quick, electrifying boost to our Ego, to that psychic mechanism by which we adjust to external stimuli and achieve self-esteem and happiness. The comic experience produces this sense of well being through an act of perception.

We sense a relationship, usually incongruous, and a relationship suggested but never explicitly stated. This perception or recognition makes us feel superior. It bolsters our Ego. The comic experience also provides pleasure from what Freud calls its economy of psychic discharge, a lighter demand on the emotions than the circumstances might have been expected to make e.g., an opportunity to laugh when we expect to be distressed. We may in addition feel superior to the stupid, or fatuous, or blandly unconscious, or mildly suffering object of the situation, and if so, this is a double delight. But it is not the essence of comedy, for there are comic situations which give us no opportunity to feel superior to anything, and in which nobody suffers.

I am familiar with Al Capp's recent contention that our delight in comedy is based on our enjoyment of someone's discomfort. Much of it is, but since mere suffering alone is not comic, the essence of the Comic must lie elsewhere. So far as I can discern from my own direct experience with the Comic, this essence lies in our pleasure at perceiving relationships. It seems the only element common to all comic expression. As a result of our perception, we are delighted at our cleverness, we understand and our Ego is nourished, even though no one suffers and we feel superior to no one. An excellent illustration, if only mildly comic, is the frontispiece to Max Eastman's *Enjoyment of Laughter*, a drawing with a one line caption. The drawing shows a sylvan scene, with a piper playing to a happy assembly of playful rabbits, lambs, chickens, birds, and even fish. Each of these exuberant creatures is bouncing on a coil of wire attached to his tail or his belly, and the caption reads, "Spring, Spring, Gentle Spring."

In addition to the basic comic experience of perception or recognition, there are many other ways of increasing our delight. One is to see others suffer, but not too much, while we are quite comfortable. Or to put it another way, we richly enjoy release from tabu. Let us remember that tabus develop only to prevent us from doing that which we want to very much, but that which society feels isn't desirable. There is strong tabu, for example, against physical aggression and against seeming to enjoy another's discomfort. But in a comic situation when we can blame our enjoyment of an act of aggression, or of another's suffering, on the recognition of an incongruity, when we can claim 'it was just too ridiculous,' then we can feel as good as we like and not be blamed for it. If this is true in situations of aggression and discomfort, how much more true in sex situations which are surrounded by heavy tabu and which are the most fertile sources of comedy. Sex itself isn't comic, but recognition of suggested relationships is the more richly enjoyed if at the same time enjoyment permits escape from sex tabu. Moreover,

comedy and particularly sex comedy, often flashes visions on the inward eye which are the bliss of solitude. Examples will readily suggest themselves.

The common formula for a stage comedy since the days of Menander allows us to enjoy both our delight in another's discomfort and our pleasure in sex situations, along with the ego nourishment from the strictly comic itself. This formula even provides a third satisfaction, that of seeing everything come out all right. This happy ending is not comic at all, but it has been associated so long with comedy that it is often spoken of as the thing itself. In this standard stage comedy, complications develop, and there is a good deal of trickery or complex intrigue at the expense of some characters. The difficulty usually centers around the arrangements for a satisfactory love affair, but in the end everything is cleared up, the right lovers are paired off and put to bed, and the audience leaves happy because it has seen through the trickery of the tricked, has enjoyed the discomfiture of the discomfited, and has rejoiced in the sex conversations and the love making. Its strictly comic delight, however, lies in perceiving the fatuities of the lovers, the obtuseness of the father or husband, the naivete of the bumpkin, the bombast of the braggart, the ingenuous double-dealing of the wife or servant. But the audience's satisfaction is increased by the additional pleasures which the comedy permits it to enjoy, and not the least of these pleasures is its comfortable superiority to the confusions and follies of the stage characters. For Comedy is not the only food that gratifies our Ego's insatiable appetite.

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But it is impossible to maintain a comfortable sense of well being if our feelings are deeply stirred by another's discomfort. Whatever the comic situation, it must be detached, apart, at a distance. It may be amusing to hear of a drunk's distress, for example, or perhaps actually to see him, but not to have him lurch against us and blow his breath in our face. Nonetheless, tears and laughter are seldom far apart, and skilled creators know the effectiveness of mingling the comic and the pathetic. Caliban is a classic example. Lawrence Sterne and Charlie Chaplin each in his own way is a master of the art. So long as the sensations of pity are mild, they serve only to enhance the sense of well-being that results from comedy. Pity at bottom is a sort of self-congratulation, by those who are comfortable, on their own relative well being, and pity and pathos are the more gratifying if they enable us to take credit for doing the right thing for those in trouble merely by being sorry. When comedy is varied with pathos of this sort, and perhaps with a few tears, it only in-

creases our sense of well being and at the same time makes us readier to enjoy the pleasures of comedy when they return again.

Dirty jokes provide what seems to be a strong confirmation of the essential egotism of comedy. Men are often puzzled that women do not enjoy a joke of this sort, and attribute the fact to women's greater delicacy or to their inborn modesty. But men do not consider that the majority of such jokes are an expression of the male ego, and disparage women. It is small wonder that women do not enjoy them, while men do. A necessarily limited observation has suggested strongly to me that if a joke does not disparage women, its indelicate subject will not prevent their enjoying it, except in social situations where they may feel they are expected to display modesty. But this is perilous ground, and I shall venture no further.

Bernard Shaw had his He-Ancient say, "When a thing is funny search it for a hidden truth." It is a shrewd remark, but it does not apply to a lot of low-level comedy, in which the incongruities are complete in themselves. Comic situations which depend on gestures, or word play, are seldom more than tricks. And many of the jokes which flood the air and fill up magazines are no richer. This is an example of what I mean. A man hires a horse for a ride in the park. The horse is ill-tempered and full of tricks. Finally it begins to buck, and the man gets angry. Then the horse gives a vicious kick and gets a hind foot caught in the stirrup. The man looks down and yells at the horse, "It serves you right. You got up here by yourself and you can damn well get down by yourself."

Another is the story of a man who was answering questions about himself for an employer: age, weight, height, marital status, experience, etc. Finally he was asked his descent and replied, "Indian."

"What tribe?"

"No tribe, just a wandering Indian."

As the Comic rises to higher levels we meet more complex situations still largely complete in themselves, like Perelman's triple-tonguing or the reduplicating irony of Max Beerbohm. But often, as Shaw suggests, the act of comparison and recognition which produces comic delight also suggests criticism of morals or manners, and may force us to examine truths which we prefer to ignore. If the comparison is sharp, and if the suggested criticism is emphatic, we have what we call Satire. There is no essential distinction between Comedy and Satire in their subjects, or their techniques, or their basic situations. The difference is largely one of mood and emphasis, and any attempt to draw a line of demarcation between them must be arbitrary. Is Aristophanes a comic writer or a satirist? What of Thurber and Ring Lardner? Or Molière? As comic

writing becomes more emphatically didactic, we think of it as satire, but when does satire become straight moralizing? I think we must say it ceases to be satire when it ceases to be comic, when there is no longer in it the basic comic experience.

When the Comic is considered at this high level, of social or moral criticism, we think of writers like Lucian and Horace and Rabelais and Cervantes and Shakespeare and Mark Twain and Bernard Shaw. But an even greater comedy than theirs is man's life on earth, a colossal incongruity which can be relished only by those of mature detachment. Leacock speaks of that basic comedy which lies in "the deeper contrasts offered by life itself: the strange inconsistency between our aspiration and our achievement, the eager and fretful anxieties that fade into nothingness tomorrow, the burning pain and the sharp sorrow that are softened in the gentle retrospect of time."

And Pope enlarges the paradox when he places man "On this isthmus of a middle state" and finds him

"Alike in ignorance, his reason such,
Whether he thinks too little or too much:
Chaos of Thought and Passion all confus'd;
Still by himself abus'd or disabus'd;
Created half to rise, and half to fall;
Great lord of all things, yet a prey to all;
Sole judge of Truth, in endless Error hurl'd:
The glory, jest, and riddle of the world!"

Erasmus, in *The Praise of Folly*, has blooming Folly suggest the only course for a wise man. Says Folly, "Age is a burden; the certainty of death inexorable. Diseases infest life's every way; accidents threaten, troubles assail without warning; there is nothing that is not tainted with gall. Nor can I recite all those evils which man suffers at the hands of man: poverty is in this class, and imprisonment, infamy, shame, tortures, snares, treachery, slander, litigation, fraud... But if one ponders upon the evils I speak of, will not one approve the example, pitiable as it is, set by the Milesian virgins," who committed suicide? Unhappily however, continues Folly, if men were generally to become wise in this way "there would be need for some fresh clay and for another potter like Prometheus." But as there is little danger of men's generally becoming wise, what shall we say to Folly's conclusion that since they cannot, they had best learn to enjoy Folly, particularly since wisdom at best only teaches them to welcome death?

* * *

When one thinks of the Human Comedy in these terms of inevitable suffering and inevitable defeat because of Man's own nature and his Fate, Comedy and Tragedy seem indistinguishable. A passage from Winston Churchill's memoirs of the British campaigns in North Africa sharpens this classic observation. Mr. Churchill recounts that after General Rommel had been thrown back hundreds of miles, with great loss of men and supplies, the British commander, General Auchinleck, planned to build up an overwhelming force over a four-month period and then annihilate the Germans and Italians. But the British War Cabinet, certain that Rommel would not stand still so long, ordered Auchinleck to pursue a more active policy or resign command. He agreed to speed up his preparations, and felt he had almost brought them to a successful end, when Rommel struck unexpectedly and drove the British before him in a costly rout. It was one of the bleakest moments in the war for Mr. Churchill but he summarizes the strategic truth learned from this disaster in the familiar anecdote of an animal trainer whose valuable bear came down with a severe sore throat. Sulfa was prescribed, and the trainer took great care in preparing a powder and in devising a tube from which he could blow it down the bear's throat. He loaded the tube, put it in the bear's mouth, and was just preparing to blow when the bear blew first. "If I venture to set this down at this moment in my story," adds Mr. Churchill, "it is because I am emboldened by the words of Socrates, 'The genius of Tragedy and Comedy are essentially the same, and they should be written by the same authors.' "

In Tragedy, unlike Comedy, we identify ourselves with the action, we suffer with the characters (not really, for we are quite comfortable, but vicariously), and in the end we experience what is called katharsis, a peace, a quietude, an exaltation, a nourishment of the Ego, a great enlargement of our sense of well being much like that which the Comic produces. For we actually have not suffered at all. And others have. But even they not really.

In everyday life, however, there is a great difference between viewing life as tragic and viewing it as comic. For we must live together, and comedy, as Sterne says, "makes the wheel of life run long and cheerfully round." Comedy may be an invasion of privacy, as Stevenson's young man complained, but if so, it is prompted by a lively sense of vanity and folly. If it is candid, it is generally tolerant withal. And if it provokes us in our complacency, it would make us laugh and see ourselves as others see us. It recognizes human fallibility, and has no zeal to reform in any particular image. It calls for less pretence, less vanity, and more understanding. The man of truest comic sense is the self-centered idealist who recognizes himself as part of his own comedy. Sir Cedric Hard-

wick tells of introducing a young boy to Bernard Shaw in his nineties. As Shaw took the youngster's hand, he said, "When you are older, you'll be proud to say you shook the hand of Bernard Shaw." And after a pause he added, "When you do, they'll ask, 'Who the hell was Bernard Shaw?'"

The spirit of Comedy is the spirit of Freedom, of give and take, of tolerance—the spirit of maturity. Those who grow angry at a jest we feel to be immature. Yet in our private lives, in our work, in our government, the controlling principles are the opposite ones—strength, competition, success. And the result is the world as we know it where victory leads but to victory, and life continues nasty, brutish, and short. Until we learn more fully the wisdom of the Comic Spirit in the fulfillment of our desires and ambitions, until we learn to face the deeper contrasts and frustrations of life candidly, until the Ego finds its satisfaction much more in the comic experience and much less in visions of domination and power, until we become morally mature, we shall remain as we now are, victims of our own heroic gestures and resounding lies. And the greatest and grimmest joke of all is—we know it.





